

Species Profile: Partridge Pigeon

scientific name: *Geophaps smithii*

family: Columbidae

The Partridge Pigeon is endemic to the tropical savannas of the Northern Territory and Western Australia (Fig. 1). It is easily recognised by the large patch of bare skin surrounding the eye, bright red in the Northern Territory subspecies (*smithii*) and yellow in the Kimberley subspecies (*blauwi*). These pigeons are also distinctive because they tend to walk almost everywhere and thus are usually seen on the ground. When forced to take off they have a very noisy wing-beat, and fly strongly and rapidly over short distances.

Partridge Pigeons are granivorous, feeding on seeds of a large array of annual and perennial grasses, sedges and herbs in the savanna understorey. They feed in loose groups

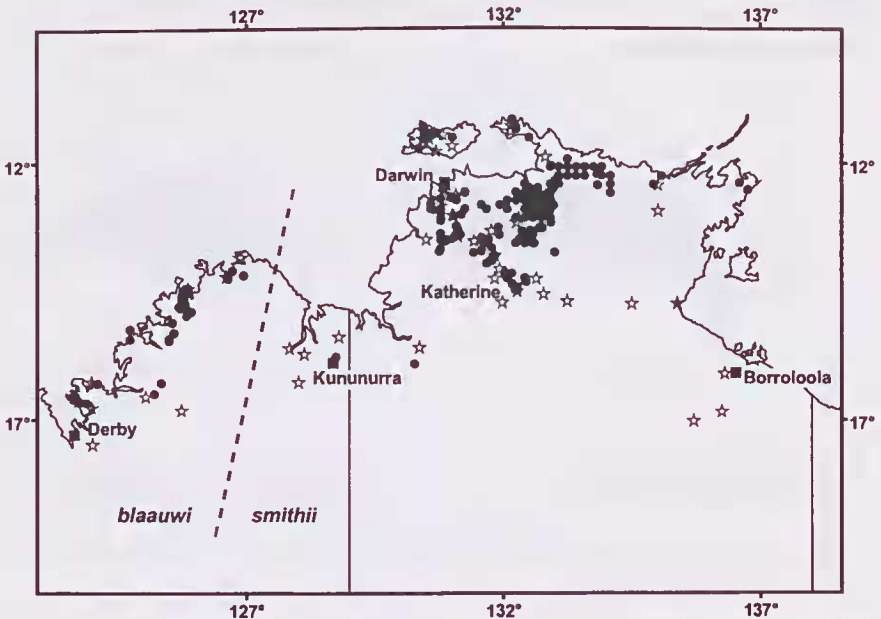


Figure 1. Distribution of the Partridge Pigeon in northern Australia. The subspecies *smithii* occurs in the Top End and far eastern Kimberley, and subspecies *blauwi* in the western Kimberley. Records before 1950 are shown as stars and those after 1950 as solid dots, illustrating the decline in range of this species.

of up to 40 birds during the Dry season, calling softly to keep in contact as they move along. Such groups walk up to 2 km every 1-2 days to water, with as many as 100 individuals seen congregating and drinking at waterholes.

Nesting takes place early in the Dry season, coinciding with the seed fall from many of the annual grasses. Nests are simply a shallow scrape in the ground sparsely lined with herbage. Two creamy white eggs are laid and the chicks emerge 2.5 weeks later, to be fed initially on a high protein milk produced in the adult birds' crop. Both parents share the incubation and feeding of the chicks and the nest is closely attended. Inconspicuous amongst the grass, the adults flush from the nest only when closely approached and have been observed to fly away erratically, mimicking injury.

Fires are prevalent in this habitat during the Dry season and can be both useful and detrimental to the species. Partridge Pigeons are commonly seen feeding in recently burnt areas, possibly because seeds are more conspicuous and predators more easily seen. However, burning in the early Dry season can destroy nests – although like other pigeons they are multibrooded and are able to renest if there are sufficient resources. Additionally, certain burning practices may in the longer term alter the composition and density of ground layer plants, affecting the seasonal availability of seeds and the suitability of the habitat for the species.

Partridge Pigeons are one of many granivores in the tropical savannas that have declined in distribution and abundance during this century. Speculations as to the reasons for the decline of the Partridge Pigeon center upon impacts on the understorey vegetation brought about through grazing by introduced herbivores, along with the cessation of traditional Aboriginal burning practices over much of northern Australia. The species is currently the subject of a research project within the Tropical Savannas CRC.

The Partridge Pigeon is illustrated on the front cover of this edition.

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